

About the risk and protective factors

Research has identified demonstrated predictors of problem behaviors and positive youth outcomes:

Protective factors organized by the Social Development Strategy

Protective factors are factors that buffer young people from risks and promote positive youth development. The Social Development Strategy organizes the protective factors into a guiding framework for promoting positive outcomes for youth. For a description of the Social Development Strategy and protective factors, go to **page 2**.

Risk factors

Research has identified 20 risk factors that can reliably predict five adolescent problem behaviors: alcohol and other drug use, delinquency, dropping out of school, teen pregnancy and violence. (The list is dynamic—risk factors are added as new research emerges.) These risk factors are based on a review of over 30 years of research across a variety of disciplines and are subject to the most rigorous research criteria. The risk factors must have been shown, in multiple longitudinal studies, to be reliable predictors of at least one of the five adolescent problem behaviors. For definitions of the risk factors, go to **page 6**.

The Social Development Strategy and Protective Factors

The Social Development Strategy

The Social Development Strategy (SDS) organizes the research on protective factors—the factors that can buffer young people from risks and promote positive youth development.

The Social Development Strategy guides communities toward their vision of positive futures for young people.

It begins with the goal of healthy, positive behaviors for young people.

It provides a research-based framework for developing the processes necessary for positive youth development, even in the presence of risk.

Protective factors that buffer young people from exposure to risks

Healthy beliefs and clear standards for behavior
—communicated by families, schools, communities and peer groups

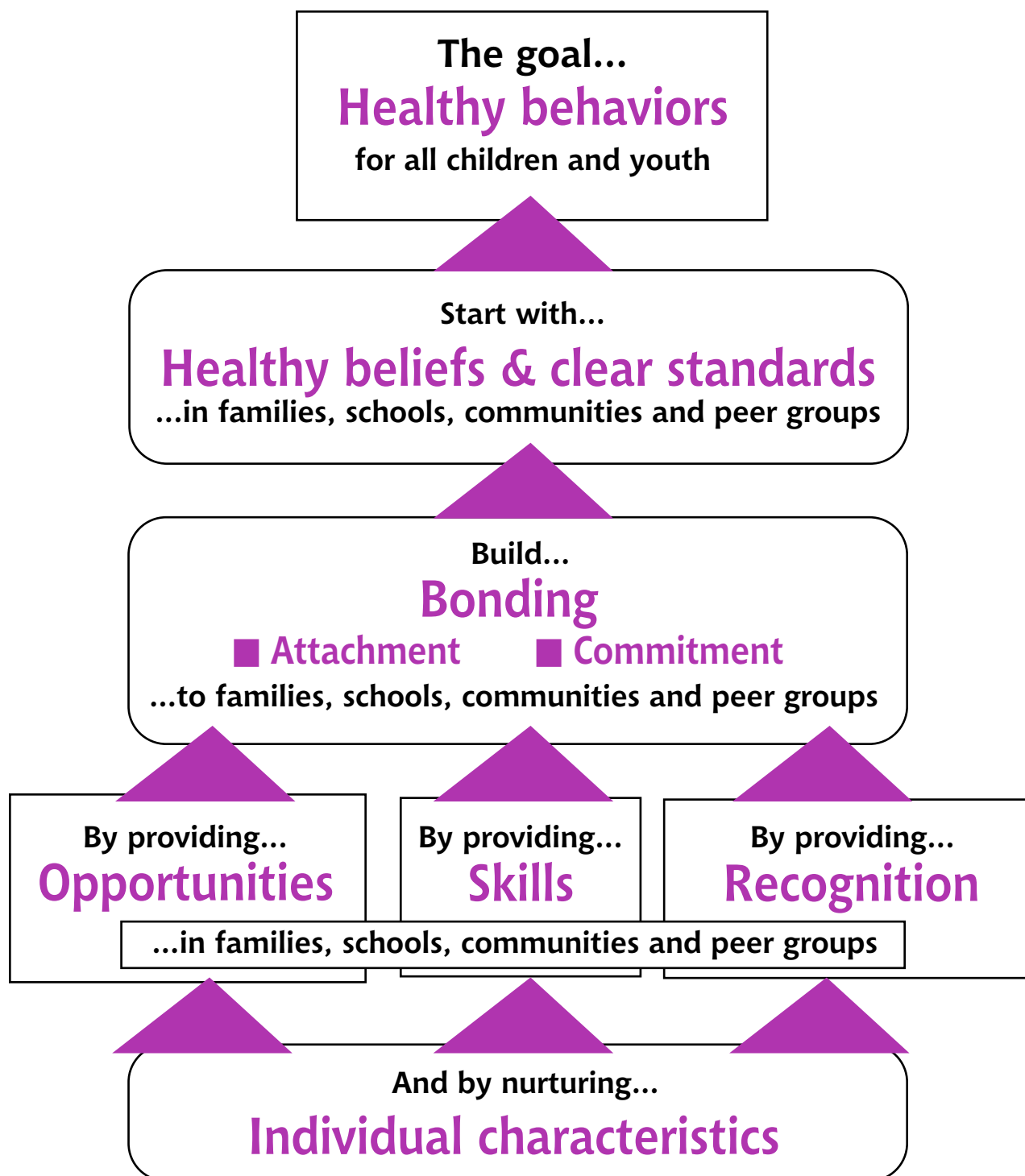
Bonding

—strong, attached relationships with adults who hold healthy beliefs and clear standards for young people, and an investment in positive lines of action such as school, service and work

Individual characteristics

—such as a positive social orientation, high intelligence and a resilient temperament

Building Protection: The Social Development Strategy



To develop healthy, positive behaviors, young people must be immersed in environments that:

Consistently communicate healthy beliefs and clear standards for behavior

Communities must identify standards for behavior that can help young people avoid problem behaviors and become healthy, productive citizens. People must then communicate those healthy beliefs and clear standards in all areas of a young person's life—at home, at school and in the community.

Foster the development of strong bonds to those who hold healthy beliefs and clear standards in their families, schools and communities

Children who have these bonds are more likely to follow the beliefs and standards these groups hold.

Research shows that a child living in a high-risk environment can be protected from problem behaviors by a strong, affectionate relationship with an adult who cares about, and is committed to, his or her healthy development. This can be any caring adult—a parent, a teacher, an extended family member, a coach, an employer or an adult from the child's faith community. The most important part of this relationship is that the youth has a long-term investment in it, that he or she believes the relationship is worth protecting, and so is motivated to follow the healthy beliefs and clear standards held by the person.

So what creates these protective bonds?

- There must be **opportunities** for young people to be involved in their families, schools and communities in meaningful, developmentally appropriate ways—to make a real contribution and feel valued for their efforts and accomplishments.
- For young people to take advantage of those opportunities, they need the social, cognitive, emotional and behavioral **skills** to be successful.
- Finally, young people need **recognition** for their involvement. They also need corrective feedback when their performance is not up to standards. Recognition and corrective feedback provide the motivation to continue to contribute.

Recognize the individual characteristics of each young person

Certain characteristics that some children come into the world with (positive social orientation, resilient temperament and high intelligence) can help protect children from risk.

For children who do not have the protective advantages of these characteristics, in order to build strong bonds to family, school and community, it is even more important for community members to:

- make extra efforts to provide opportunities for involvement
- teach the social, emotional and cognitive skills needed to be successful
- recognize children's efforts as well as their successes.

The Social Development Strategy must be woven into all areas of youth development in the community, for example, in:

Individual relationships,

where adults can serve as healthy role models for youth and provide them with opportunities and recognition for positive social involvement.

Youth-servicing organizations and programs,

which can provide youth with opportunities to interact with adults and peers who have positive social values, skills to successfully take part in those opportunities and recognition for their involvement.

All segments of the community,

which can establish healthy beliefs and clear standards through clear and consistent laws, values, policies and practices—for adult and youth behavior.

Risk Factors

Community domain

Availability of drugs (substance abuse, violence)

The more available alcohol and other drugs are in a community, the higher the risk for alcohol and other drug use and violence. Perceived availability of drugs is also associated with increased risk. In schools where children think that drugs are more available, a higher rate of drug use occurs (Johnston, O'Malley & Bachman, 1985).

Availability of firearms (delinquency, violence)

Firearm availability and firearm homicide have increased since the late 1950s. If there is a gun in the home, it is much more likely to be used against a relative or friend than against an intruder or stranger. Also, when a firearm is used in a crime or assault, the outcome is much more likely to be fatal than if another weapon or no weapon is used.

While a few studies report no association between firearm availability and violence, more studies do show a relationship. Given the lethality of firearms, the greater likelihood of conflict escalating into homicide when guns are present, and the strong association between availability of guns and homicide rates, firearm availability is included as a risk factor (Reiss & Roth, 1993).

Community laws and norms favorable toward drug use, firearms, and crime (substance abuse, delinquency, violence)

The attitudes and policies a community holds in relation to drug use, firearms and crime are communicated in a variety of ways: through laws and written policies, through informal social practices, and through the expectations parents and other members of the community have of young people. When laws, tax rates and community standards are favorable toward alcohol and other drug use, firearms or crime—or even when they are just unclear—young people are at higher risk (Sampson, 1986; Holder & Blose, 1987; Brook et al., 1990).

One example of a community law affecting drug use is alcohol taxation, where higher tax rates decrease the rate of alcohol use (Saffer & Grossman, 1987; Hawkins, Arthur & Catalano, 1995).

An example of conflicting messages about alcohol and other drug use can be found in community acceptance of alcohol use as a social activity. The beer gardens popular at street fairs and community festivals frequented by young people are in contrast to the “say no” messages that schools and parents may be promoting. This makes it difficult for children to decide which norms to follow.

Laws regulating the sale of firearms have had small effects on violent crime, and the effects usually diminish after the law has been in effect for multiple years. A number of studies suggest that the small and diminishing effect is due to two factors—the availability of firearms from other jurisdictions without legal prohibitions on sales or access, and lack of proactive monitoring or enforcement of the laws (Reiss & Roth, 1993).

Community domain (cont'd)

Media portrayals of violence (violence)

The effect of media violence on viewers' behavior (especially young viewers) has been debated for decades. Research has shown a clear correlation between media portrayal of violence and the development of aggressive and violent behavior. Exposure to media violence appears to affect children in several ways: children learn violent behaviors from watching actors act violently; they learn violent problem-solving strategies; and media portrayals of violence appear to alter children's attitudes and sensitivity to violence (Eron & Huesmann, 1987; Huesmann & Miller, 1994).

Transitions and mobility (substance abuse, delinquency, school drop-out)

Even normal school transitions can predict increases in problem behaviors. When children move from elementary school to middle school, or from middle school to high school, significant increases in drug use, dropping out of school and antisocial behavior may occur (Hawkins & Catalano, 1996).

Communities with high rates of mobility appear to be linked to an increased risk of drug and crime problems. The more people in a community who move, the greater the risk of criminal behavior and drug-related problems in families in these communities (Sampson, 1986; Sampson & Lauritsen, 1994).

Low neighborhood attachment and community disorganization (substance abuse, delinquency, violence)

Higher rates of drug problems, delinquency, violence and drug trafficking occur where people have little attachment to the community. Vandalism rates are high when there is low surveillance of public places. These conditions are not limited to low-income neighborhoods—they can also be found in more well-to-do neighborhoods.

Perhaps the most significant issue affecting community attachment is whether residents feel they can make a difference in their communities. If the key players (such as merchants, teachers, police, and human and social services personnel) live outside the community, residents' sense of commitment will be lower. Lower rates of voter turnout and parent involvement in school also reflect attitudes about community attachment. Neighborhood disorganization makes it more difficult for schools, churches and families to promote positive social values and norms (Sampson, 1986, 1997; Sampson & Lauritsen, 1994; Herting & Guest, 1985; Gottfredson, 2001).

Extreme economic deprivation (substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school drop-out, violence)

Children who live in deteriorating neighborhoods characterized by extreme poverty, poor living conditions and high unemployment are more likely to develop problems with alcohol and other drug use, delinquency, teen pregnancy and dropping out of school. They are also more likely to engage in violence toward others during adolescence and adulthood. Further, children who live in these areas and have behavior or adjustment problems early in life are even more likely to develop problems with drugs (Sampson, 1986; Sampson & Lauritsen, 1994; Farrington, 1989; Robins & Ratcliff, 1979; Elliott et al., 1989).

Family domain

Family history of the problem behavior (substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school drop-out, violence)

In a family with a history of addiction to alcohol or other drugs, children are at increased risk of developing alcohol or other drug problems themselves (Cloninger et al., 1985; Johnson et al., 1984; Brook et al., 1990). In families with a history of criminal behavior, children's risk for delinquency increases (Farrington, 1989). Similarly, children of teenage mothers are more likely to be teen parents, and children of dropouts are more likely to drop out of school themselves.

Family management problems

(substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school drop-out, violence) Poor family management practices include a lack of clear expectations for behavior; failure of parents to supervise and monitor their children (knowing where they are and whom they're with); and excessively severe, harsh or inconsistent punishment. Children exposed to these poor family management practices are at higher risk of developing all five problem behaviors (Kandel & Andrews, 1987; Brook et al., 1990; Farrington, 1989; Sampson, 1986; Hawkins, Arthur & Catalano, 1995).

Family conflict (substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school drop-out, violence)

Persistent, serious conflict between primary caregivers or between caregivers and children appears to increase children's risk for all five problem behaviors. Conflict between family members appears to be more important than family structure (e.g., whether the family is headed by two biological parents, a single parent or another primary caregiver) (Brook et al., 1990; Sampson, 1986).

Favorable parental attitudes and involvement in the problem behavior (substance abuse, delinquency, violence)

Parents' attitudes and behavior toward drugs, crime and violence influence the attitudes and behavior of their children. Children whose parents approve of or excuse them for breaking the law are more likely to become involved with juvenile delinquency. Children whose parents engage in violent behavior inside or outside the home are at greater risk for violent behavior.

If parents use illegal drugs, are heavy users of alcohol, or tolerate children's use, children are more likely to become drug users in adolescence. The risk is further increased if parents involve children in their own drug- or alcohol-using behavior—for example, asking the child to light the parent's cigarette or get the parent a beer from the refrigerator. Parental approval of children's moderate drinking, even under supervision, increases the risk that the children will use marijuana and develop problems with alcohol or other drugs (Barnes & Welte, 1986; Brook et al., 1986; Johnson, Schontz & Locke, 1984; Kandel & Andrews, 1987).

School domain

Academic failure beginning in late elementary school (substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school drop-out, violence)

Beginning in the late elementary grades, academic failure increases the risk of all five problem behaviors. It appears that the experience of failure, not any lack of ability, increases the risk of these problem behaviors (Najaka, Gottfredson & Wilson, 2001; Maguin & Loeber, 1996; Farrington, 1989; Gottfredson, 2001).

Lack of commitment to school (substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school drop-out, violence)

Lack of commitment to school means the child no longer sees the role of student as meaningful and rewarding. Young people who have lost this commitment to school are at higher risk for all five problem behaviors (Najaka et al., 2001; Gottfredson, 2001; Jessor & Jessor, 1977).

Peer and individual domain

Early and persistent antisocial behavior (substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school drop-out, violence)

Boys who are aggressive in grades K-3 or who have trouble controlling impulses are at higher risk for alcohol and other drug use, delinquency and violent behavior. When a boy's aggressive behavior in the early grades is combined with isolation, withdrawal, hyperactivity or attention deficit disorder, there is an even greater risk of problems in adolescence.

This risk factor also includes persistent antisocial behavior in early adolescence, such as misbehaving in school, skipping school and getting into fights with other children. Both girls and boys who engage in these behaviors in early adolescence are at increased risk for all five problem behaviors (Farrington, 1989; Moffitt, 1993; Hawkins et al., 1998; Lipsey & Derzon, 1998; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1998; Robins, 1978; Gottfredson, 2001).

Rebelliousness (substance abuse, delinquency, school drop-out)

Young people who do not feel that they are part of society or bound by rules, who don't believe in trying to be successful or responsible, or who take an active rebellious stance toward society are at higher risk for drug use, delinquency and dropping out of school (Jessor & Jessor, 1977; Kandel, 1982; Bachman et al., 1981; Shedler & Block, 1990; Robins, 1980).

Peer and individual domain (cont'd)

Friends who engage in the problem behavior (substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school drop-out, violence)

This is one of the most consistent predictors that research has identified. Even when young people come from well-managed families and do not experience other risk factors, spending time with friends who engage in problem behaviors greatly increases their risk of developing those behaviors (Newcomb & Bentler, 1986; Brook et al., 1990; Kandel & Andrews, 1987; Hansen et al., 1987).

Gang involvement (substance abuse, delinquency, violence)

Research has shown that children who have delinquent friends are more likely to use alcohol and other drugs and to engage in violent or delinquent behavior than children who do not have delinquent friends. But the influence of gang involvement on alcohol and other drug use, delinquency and violence exceeds the influence of delinquent friends on these problem behaviors. Gang members are even more likely than children who have delinquent friends to use alcohol or other drugs and to engage in delinquent or violent behavior (Thornberry, 1999; Battin-Pearson, Thornberry, Hawkins & Krohn, 1998; Battin, Hill, Abbot, Catalano & Hawkins, 1998).

Favorable attitudes toward the problem behavior (substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school drop-out)

During the elementary years, children usually express anti-drug, anti-crime and prosocial views; they have trouble imagining why people use drugs, commit crimes and drop out of school. In middle school, as others they know participate in such activities, their attitudes often shift toward greater acceptance, placing them at higher risk (Kandel et al., 1978; Krosnick & Judd, 1982; Gottfredson, 2001).

Early initiation of the problem behavior (substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school drop-out, violence)

The earlier that young people use drugs, commit crimes, first drop out of school or become sexually active, the greater their chances of having chronic problems with the respective behavior. Aggressive behavior at ages 4-8 predicts later violent behavior (Nagin & Tremblay, 1999), and truancy in the elementary grades predicts school drop-out. For example, research shows that young people who start drug use before age 15 have twice the risk of drug problems than those who start after age 19 (Robins, 1978; Rachal et al., 1982; Kandel, 1982; Gottfredson, 2001).

Constitutional factors (substance abuse, delinquency, violence)

Constitutional factors may have a biological or physiological basis. These factors include sensation-seeking, low harm-avoidance and lack of impulse control, and appear to increase the risk of drug use, delinquency and/or violent behavior (Lerner & Vicary, 1984; Shedler & Block, 1990; Farrington, 1989; Gottfredson, 2001).

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